

Penetrating the Mysteries of Ravello

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How abundant with curiosities is this land we call America, this Anglo-European culture we call the melting pot. Our greatest author lives* not here but in far-off Italy, as does our greatest literary critic, our greatest essayist, and probably our greatest visionary. Who are these expatriates? They are one in the same. They are Gore Vidal himself alone. Mr. Vidal, the author of *Williwaw* and so many other memorable masterworks, lives in Ravello, south of Naples, where, as he says, "I do nothing but think about my country. The United States is my theme and all that dwell in it." I put this down as the purest act of patriotism since Jimmy Carter forsook the plow.

From a spectacular Romanesque villa commanding a cliff hundreds of feet above the Mediterranean Sea, Vidal looks ever westward, and with garlic fumes to his back, analyzes "the last empire on earth," capitalism run amok, and the horror of the "heterosexual dictatorship" that so oppresses the libidinous elf squirming within us all. Mr. Vidal's is not an easy life. Yet the villa, built in 1927 by Countess Szechenyi, the daughter of Lord Grimthorpe, is spacious, serene, and secure, an ideal laboratory for his valuable cerebrations. The happy result has been a relentless stream of learned disquisitions, generally appearing in the *New York Review of Books*, but occasionally turning up in more abstruse journals like *Marxist Perspectives*. Of course, some of The Novels have been written in Ravello, and it is there that Mr. Vidal prepares the lectures that he gives during his annual invasion of the American chautauqua circuit. His appearances on college campuses have been the high point in many a young student's educational development.

By his own admission Vidal is "a propagandist, a proselytizer, and a teacher." His earlier, less complicated writing made him a fortune of sorts, but today he is almost wholly devoted to writing literature for the ages and to apprising the world of the doom that awaits it if America does not follow a more enlightened course. Assiduously he propagates his message of reason, progress, radical reform, and an end to the infernal doings of the Rockefellers. Few among the intelligentsia have been more selfless and single-minded. When the revolution finally comes one hopes that Mr. Vidal will be around to enjoy it. He deserves a time of dawn rather than an era of gloom. On the other hand, one has to hope that the revolution does not arrive in Italy before coming to America. It would be a highly vexatious disruption of Mr. Vidal's work were Comrade Berlinguer to

expropriate his villa; and to a rising generation of radical thinkers in America it would be decidedly distressing. Championing radical reform in America is an unrewarding business, and we intellectuals will never forget the November/December 1974 issue of *Architectural Digest: The Connoisseur's Magazine of Fine Interior Design*, wherein our brother's villa, named "La Rondinaia," was featured.

"It's heaven," Howard Austen has observed, "except for the phones and the servants. You get a couple, and either the woman is crazy or the man's a drunk...or both." Howard has been Gore's constant companion since 1950. "And the gardener, I'd rather not talk about *him*," Howard fumed. These judgments are recorded in a rare interview granted by the fellows to *Vogue* magazine in the early seventies. Admittedly, *Vogue* is not known to have a very intellectual readership, but then if one is truly serious about socialism and the heterosexual dictatorship one will carry the struggle to all parts. After all, even Hannah Arendt had to buy an occasional evening gown. And only Yahweh knows; some rainy afternoon not yet arrived a middle-aged Patty Hearst might just thumb through an ancient copy of *Vogue* and *oooooh* the old flame could rekindle, the *Internationale* could strike up anew, and the American establishment might again be wobbled.

Lemon Trees and Flowers

These are the kinds of calculations Gore and Howard must make, as the pasta boils in the kitchen and the gardener flummoxes in the sunshine amid "La Rondinaia's" six acres of lemon trees and flowers. I have followed Gore's work for years, and I like to think of him as the Frantz Fanon of upper Park Avenue; could it be that Howard is his Ché Guevara? The relationship has been a long one, and I cannot but believe it has been full of high purpose. *Vogue* reports that "They are just good friends, nothing else, now." And Howard allows as how "We each have our own friends, and we each respect what the other does." But precisely what does Howard do, and what has he been doing since 1950? There is mystery here. Gore fires off salvos at the Rockefeller conspiracy, lectures, and improves us with The Novels; but what is Howard's role? *Vogue* notifies us that his spinach soup and lemon chiffon pie are universally admired, but I have heard nothing of them. Just lolling around Gore's villa, making pies, and enduring the gardener—is the thing possible? Conceivably Howard, whose

markedly boyish facade conceals a man of middle years, is Gore's contact with the Baader-Meinhof gang. Perhaps he clandestinely bankrolls a Puerto Rican bomb emporium or a liberation cabal as yet unactivated. Could he be in the pay of Arab idealists? A friend and advisor to Carlos (Fats) Martinez, the international terrorist? From his badinage in *Vogue* it is apparent he is a smooth operator. Yet maybe his association with Gore is entirely on the up and up. Gore could use a Boswell, and Howard assuredly has perceived the essence of the great man: "He's crazy about peas, and he'll kill for baby potatoes and asparagus." This man is no fool. Whatever his role on this orb, my guess is that when he passes on to glory some lucky relative will be made heir to a vast collection of hitherto unknown watercolors full of vivid truth, poems that will inflame you, works of beauty. Gore could not exist without the company of discriminating minds.

Who is this hind? Christened Eugene Luther Vidal, Jr., he is now known simply as Gore Vidal (vē 'däl) to his customer, and it is a rare American who has not at one time or another been his customer. He has written novels, mysteries, Hollywood and TV screenplays, book reviews, essays, and poems. Furthermore he has appeared on television more often than Idi Amin. It was through the medium of television that he essayed to rid America of William F. Buckley, Jr., a man who quite definitely, albeit curiously, unhinges Gore. The noble effort began in January 1962, on a national TV talk show during which Gore, then as now a confirmed pagan, charged that Buckley had attacked no less an eminence than the Pope. The Pope, at least in the early sixties, was in especially good odor with TV junkies, and Gore found the battle joined. Full of duty and courage, he set out to elucidate the frightening dimensions of right-wingery then being resurrected by this fellow Buckley. That is to say, he turned up every few nights before the country's insomniacs to malign Buckley, his family, and his friends. The war ended sadly for Gore when he appeared face to face with the fabled debater on New York's Les Crane Show; as one reviewer characterized it, Gore had his flesh nibbled off by "a fair-haired barracuda named William Buckley, Jr."

Gore was, in time, to suffer greater ignominies at Buckley's hands. Nevertheless he pursued him doggedly and some-

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 Roger Starr

Exporting Environmental Havoc

American environmentalists have worked furiously to save the snail darter, the furbish lousewort, and the "idea" of wilderness. The inadvertent result will be the devastation of the ancient hunting lands of Quebec's Cree Indians.

Nature's best hope in the western world is that the conservationists of the United States will learn to conserve their own energy. They have been spending themselves so lavishly and successfully to save their native environment that they have deflected the threats against it—often in aggravated form—to neighboring countries, Canada particularly. What the western world needs is orderly development. What it has been getting is American Environmental Imperialism. As Peter J. Bernstein, writing in the *Toronto Star-Journal* about the monstrous James Bay power project in Quebec, put it: "There is a feeling among Canadians, that Canada is undertaking development projects that produce environmental problems of a scale unacceptable to Americans."

Much more than enthusiasm is needed to resist degradation of the natural world or of the ethnic world of primitive people. Conservation requires professionally-trained specialists capable of distinguishing between important and trivial dangers. It requires the patience to make difficult distinctions carefully and the wisdom to establish goals that harmonize the values of the environment with those of the economy. While professionals can make these judgments, the money and zeal that drive their organizations come from members who perceive wildlife as benign, noncompetitive, and undemanding. This childlike sentiment makes it difficult for them to agree to accept the loss of any part of it in order to achieve a saving which they cannot see.

A rather gaudy prototype of the environmental zealot who has not bothered to measure the impact of his own energy is the movie actor, Robert Redford. Offscreen, Redford starred with great success in a psychodrama that stopped the construction of a large, coal-burning electric generating station on an unpopulated Utah plateau called Kaiparowits.

The issues involved in Kaiparowits are worth recounting briefly, because they help make clear the danger that unreflective environmentalism—blocking a relatively insignificant disturbance to the natural order—may produce a more significant disturbance elsewhere.

The Kaiparowits scheme which galvanized Redford into action was, despite its size and importance, a relatively minor environmental threat. The coal that would have provided its energy was not to be strip-mined, but dug from deep, covered mines. The mines were directly below the plant, a location which dispensed with railroad trackage across wild country. Nobody lived within miles of the proposed plant, and therefore it could not impose any

possible air pollution on a human settlement. Its water requirements did not exceed existing available flows. The one serious environmental problem raised by serious people was the probability that its stack emissions, despite the highest current technology, would slightly depress air quality over a national park. It must be emphasized that the quality would have remained far better than that demanded by the most restrictive federal regulations.

The sponsors of Kaiparowits battled the opposition of environmental groups for thirteen years, only to yield after Redford denounced on television the intrusion of high technology in the beautiful wilderness area of southern Utah. Redford warned that the very idea of wilderness, its capacity to renew the human spirit for future generations, would be destroyed in the minds of men by the construction of a power plant. The destruction would be as great whether or not they could see it. Simply knowing it was there would do the damage.

Redford urged his fellow citizens to turn their backs on technological civilization. In the process, he must have forgotten that many who derive satisfaction from the western wilderness are hunters whose pleasures depend on technology. They hunt with rifles, machine-made from steel produced in electric-powered open hearth furnaces using pig iron reduced from ore in oxygen-blast furnaces. They could not afford a return to hand-forged weapons. Even if Redford forswore hunting for himself, he can combine movies with wilderness only because high-technology automobiles or airplanes can carry him to the Utah wilderness from the urban jungle of Los Angeles. If, indeed, Redford succeeded in persuading other hunters to change to bows, they would be high-technology bows. A supply of yew trees, bowmakers, and fletchers—adequate for Robin Hood's merry men and the English at Agincourt—never would outfit the present hunting population. If Redford had persuaded all American hunters to give up their hobby to protect the Utah wilderness, he would then have had to make his peace with the many American and foreign workers who eat only because they manufacture the rifles, hunting clothes, sleeping bags, lanterns, tents, and other paraphernalia needed for the hunt.

Enthusiasts like Redford seem never to notice that stopping a proposal like Kaiparowits does not reduce the need for power. It merely stimulates the search for substitute sources that cannot be stopped. If electric power for the west cannot be supplied by coal—as at Kaiparowits—it will be supplied by some other fuel—natural gas from Alaska, perhaps, liquefied under great pressure and sent by ship to the Los Angeles area. If liquefied natural gas tankers are blocked by environmentalists, the gas itself may be piped across Canada, where construction of a pipeline will

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